

# JOHN DEAR

*Foreword by Nobel Peace Prize Winner*

**MAIREAD CORRIGAN MAGUIRE**



## THE BEATITUDES *of* PEACE

*Meditations on*

**THE BEATITUDES, PEACEMAKING  
AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE**



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**SERMON ON THE MOUNT**

by Laura James

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*For Fr. Ray East, and his sisters  
Gertrude East and Ceci East,  
friends and peacemakers,  
to say thank you for our  
pilgrimage to South Africa*

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W

*hen he saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he had sat down, his disciples came to him and he began to teach them, saying:*

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit; theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are those who mourn; they will be comforted.*

*Blessed are the meek; they will inherit the earth.*

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice; they will be satisfied.*

*Blessed are the merciful; they will be shown mercy.*

*Blessed are the pure in heart; they shall see God.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers; they shall be called the sons and daughters of God.*

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice; theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are you, when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you falsely because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

## FOREWORD

In this beautiful book, Father John Dear describes the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount as “the blueprint for Christian discipleship, the job description of every Christian.”

It is good to have a blueprint, and what better blueprint for those of us who wish to be followers of Jesus than the gospels and the teachings of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 5–7, “The Sermon on the Mount.”

I am reminded of the words of the late American theologian Fr. John L. McKenzie, who wrote, “You cannot read the gospels and not know that Jesus was totally nonviolent.”

After calling his disciples, Jesus, the prophet and teacher, told them how to find “True Happiness” in the Sermon on the Mount. Little wonder then that we are told that crowds flocked to listen to Jesus. He touched upon what every heart wishes exactly to know—how to be happy.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus explains how the motive and the heart must be pure, and the greatest desire must be to do what God requires. Then Jesus assures the crowd that God will satisfy them fully! Everything must be done in a spirit of humility, knowing that we are spiritually poor. Everything must be done in a spirit of mercy and love.

We are also told in the Sermon of the Mount, “Happy are those who work for peace; God will call them his children.” Finally, we are reminded to be happy even when we are insulted and persecuted because we are followers of Jesus.

Jesus clearly calls us to be prophets, and often with prophecy comes persecution. It must have been hard for many in the crowd to hear this, but still Jesus assures them, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven,” and “Happy are those who mourn; God will comfort them.”

Two thousand years ago, when Jesus spoke to his disciples and the crowd, he was addressing people who knew all about pain, suffering, and persecution. They were all living under Roman occupation and daily experiencing poverty, slavery, and violence. Yet Jesus called them to be happy and to work for peace and justice with the promise that God will call them his children and bless them.

Today in our world, we face increasing violence, militarism, war, and environmental crisis. We are especially conscious that, in the land of Jesus' birth, the Palestinian people live under Israeli military occupation. Therefore, the Sermon on the Mount is still very relevant for us all, especially for those who wish to follow Jesus.

Today, we are all called to be peacemakers and prophets, to work for freedom, peace, and social and political justice for all people, including the Palestinians. We are called to create a new way of living together nonviolently, welcoming people from all faiths and none, as one human family.

In this book, John Dear recounts his ongoing journey into nonviolence as a way of life, as the way of Jesus, and as the way to life. I hope it will inspire and touch many hearts.

Each of us can choose peace over war, nonviolence over violence, and love over hate. After reading and studying the Beatitudes, Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, and these reflections, may the Spirit of Love lead us to choose peace and nonviolence, and to abandon war and militarism once and for all.

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*December 2015*

## INTRODUCTION

Long ago, as a twenty-one-year-old dreamer, I flew to Israel by myself to make a pilgrimage through the Holy Land so that I could walk in the footsteps of Jesus. For days, I tramped through the cobblestoned alleyways of Jerusalem's Old City, the rocky fields around Bethlehem, and the bustling streets of Nazareth. Like millions before me, I toured the holy sites in an effort to learn the landscape of Jesus. But I reserved the best for last—a week of camping by the Sea of Galilee.

I hardly spoke to a soul, or saw anyone for that matter. The place was deserted because only a few weeks before, Israel had invaded Lebanon, with the military and financial help of the United States, in a bombing war that killed 60,000 people in just three months.

It was the summer of 1982, and the Pentagon named their little war “Operation Peace for Galilee.”

There I was in the middle of it—and totally clueless. I walked around in a daze, pondering the life of Jesus, meditating on the gospels, praying for the grace to know how to follow him and to spend my life doing that.

I was on my own “Operation Peace for Galilee,” even though I didn't know it. It was a far different kind of campaign that would have long-term consequences for my own life.

As I made my way to the north shore, I came upon the beautiful Chapel of the Beatitudes, built in the 1930s with funding from the Italian dictator Mussolini, on a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee. It's an unusual, small, circular church with a tall, gray dome, surrounded on four sides by a square walkway with arches and pillars.

Standing alone inside, I noticed that the Beatitudes were written on the walls of the eight-sided church. As I read them,

I was overcome by their message. I hadn't ever paid much attention to them or their countercultural challenge. But here in this beautiful setting, after weeks of walking, in the silence before the Sea of Galilee, they demanded my full attention. It dawned on me there and then that these words were the hope and prayer and vision of Jesus, and he was quite serious about them. They outlined the way Jesus wanted his followers to live. They were the blueprint for Christian discipleship, the job description of every Christian, the roadmap for the pilgrimage of every Christian. Suddenly, I realized that this included me! These words demanded to be lived, and not by someone else, but at that moment, by me. They proposed a specific course for my life, one that had never before occurred to me, one that terrified me as I considered their authority and the person who first spoke them.

I had not planned on this. I dreamed of a nice summer in Israel, a time of prayer and tourism and adventure before I entered the seminary. I was oblivious to the war and the consequences of following the peacemaking Jesus. Deeply shaken by these words and their challenge, I spent the next few hours looking out over the Sea of Galilee. It was a hot July afternoon, with a clear blue sky and gorgeous green hills surrounding the bright blue sea. As I mulled over these mysterious, upside-down teachings, I pondered whether or not I should really try to live according to them. I had no idea how to do that, but I felt called to take up the challenge. Anything less seemed false and hypocritical.

Just then, as I pondered the invitation of the Beatitudes and the One who taught them, several black Israeli jets flew overhead, breaking the sound barrier, setting off sonic booms. They swooped down over the Sea of Galilee on their way to war in Lebanon. There and then, I decided to spend my life trying to live according to the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount,

and teach them. Having seen the reality of warfare over the Sea of Galilee, I embarked on my own “Operation Peace” and never looked back.

This little book is a direct result of that experience at the Chapel of the Beatitudes in 1982.

Only later did I realize that Israeli jets had been flying over me for days. I had been traipsing through a warzone, oblivious to its brutal reality. I didn’t care, didn’t see how it concerned me, didn’t think it concerned the spiritual life, and didn’t understand how I could do anything about it. It took the words on the walls of the Chapel of the Beatitudes to wake me up, to open my eyes to what was happening right around me, and to set me on the course of Christian discipleship.

In other words, it took the Beatitudes themselves to show me that God calls us to be peacemakers, to hunger and thirst for justice, to practice mercy and meekness, to risk persecution for the struggle for justice and peace. Whether or not I would actually make a difference in this world of war and injustice wasn’t my responsibility; the outcome lies with God. I was called to live the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount, to do what I could. And so, I set out from the Chapel to live the rest of my life according to the Beatitudes of peace and the Sermon on the Mount.

The Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount have stayed with me ever since those charged days by the Sea of the Galilee. I have studied them, prayed over them, made retreats about them, lectured on them, and done the best I could to live them. Some twenty-five years later, I went back to Galilee and the Chapel of the Beatitudes for the first time. By now, I was an ordained Catholic priest, author of several books on nonviolence, and recipient of two master’s degrees in theology. I had given hundreds of talks on peace, organized scores of demonstrations against war, lived in a refugee camp in El Salvador,

taught in a Catholic high school, and been arrested dozens of times for antiwar, anti-nuclear protests. I had even hammered on a nuclear weapon at the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in Goldsboro, North Carolina, faced twenty years in prison, was convicted of two felonies, and spent some eight months in jail and over a year under house arrest. I was, to be blunt, up to my ears in the world of war. Still, the Beatitudes beckoned me as never before with their otherworldly vision of peace and the practical demands of creative nonviolence, justice, and mercy. I couldn't claim to live them, much less embody them, but I keep trying because they're our highest ideal and duty.

At the time, I was the director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the largest, oldest interfaith peace organization in the U.S. I had come to Israel/Palestine to lead an interfaith delegation of Jews, Muslims, and Christians, to learn about the occupation, and to offer support and solidarity to those working nonviolently to end it. We spent several weeks with human rights activists in Jerusalem, Palestinian families who had their homes bulldozed by Israeli settlers, Palestinians who had spent time in prison during the Intifada, and Israeli and Palestinian groups who worked together to herald a new, non-violent Holy Land. We listened, prayed, and learned. It helped that we practiced the interfaith nonviolence we envisioned for Israel/Palestine. When confronted by angry Israelis, our rabbi friend responded in Hebrew with words of peace. When met by angry Muslims, our Muslim friends responded in Arabic with words of peace. In the company of angry Christians, those of us who were Christian shared our faith journey and the gospel vision of peace.

Toward the end of our stay, my friends Fr. Bob Keck and Fr. Bill Pickard and I drove up to Galilee to spend an afternoon in quiet meditation at the Chapel of the Beatitudes. This time, I had a far greater understanding of the current political land-

scape, the nightmare of the U.S.-backed Israeli occupation of Palestine, the world of war, and the gospel alternative of peace. I knew much more about the Sermon on the Mount and its social, economic, and political vision of nonviolence.

My friends and I had planned on making a little retreat on the Beatitudes with quiet time in the chapel followed by Mass on the grassy hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee. But just after we arrived, the weather suddenly turned. The sky grew black, and a heavy rain began to fall. The Chapel of the Beatitudes was mobbed with tourists, and they crowded into the chapel and the balconies around it. Eventually, we too made it inside, but the mobs of tourists were noisy, talking loudly and taking pictures. We sat there for a while, and I recalled that hot summer of 1982 and my experience with the words on the church walls. Once the rain stopped, my friends proposed that we leave the crowds and take the boat ride out on the Sea of Galilee, so off we went.

Down by the wharf, we boarded one of the empty “St. Peter Boats,” built of wood in the style of first-century fishing vessels. It was just the three of us, and we had the entire boat to ourselves. The sky was filled with turbulent black clouds, and the sea churned with high waves, but there was a warm breeze and the captain said we would be safe and sound.

Just as we were scheduled to leave, a tour bus pulled up, and out poured thirty, white, retired Americans from a fundamentalist Christian church in Texas. They noisily boarded our boat, and we set off at once onto the rough sea. Within minutes, they passed out American flags, and then actually raised an American flag on the ship’s mast. The pastor announced that he would lead a prayer for America. “Thank you, dear God,” he began, “for making us Americans so that we do not have to live in this horrible place in the Middle East...” After his fervent nationalist speech, he led the devout in professing the

pledge of allegiance. They looked up as one to the American flag, recited their creed, and then sang with gusto their theme song, "God Bless America." As they finished singing to the flag with all the emotion and power they could, the entire group burst into tears. "God bless America!" some shouted. "Long live America!" "God bless our troops!"

Their patriotism and nationalism shocked me. I took it as another sign. Instead of praising God for Jesus, the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, and the teachings and miracles performed at the Sea of Galilee, these Christians saluted the flag and pledged their allegiance to America, their true god. I thought their whole performance was a blatant act of blasphemy, right there on the Sea of Galilee. It was an outright betrayal and overt rejection of Jesus. Not only did they insult the land of Jesus' birth, they showed how they rejected his teachings and preferred idolatrous nationalism instead.

Of course, they are not the only ones who do that. Everyone does.

I have gone back to the Sea of Galilee one more time. It was the spring of 2008, and I was invited to address the Sabeel Conference on the Palestinian occupation. Some eight hundred Palestinian Christian activists and human rights leaders gathered in a hotel in occupied Bethlehem for eight days to discuss strategies for nonviolently resisting the U.S.-backed Israeli occupation. Speakers included the cardinal of Jerusalem, an archbishop from South Africa, several leading Scripture scholars, and the Palestinian leadership. I gave the closing keynote address on the spiritual roots of nonviolence and resistance to empire.

That week was one of the greatest experiences of my life. It was a blessing to meet such serious Palestinian Christians and offer words of encouragement. Together, we denounced the U.S.-backed Israeli occupation of Palestine as nothing less than

apartheid, as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and President Jimmy Carter have called it. We recommitted ourselves to ending this systemic injustice and working for a new nonviolent Middle East, a new nonviolent world.

Afterwards, I drove north by myself to Galilee to spend a few days of quiet retreat by the Sea, sitting in the silence of the Chapel of the Beatitudes. This time the weather was perfect, and the chapel was empty. I remembered that first summer by the Sea of Galilee in 1982 and pondered my unfolding peace pilgrimage. I breathed in the peace of the sea breeze, meditated again on these teachings, and renewed my commitment to live according to the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount, to follow the Jesus of the gospels, and to take him at his word. More than ever, I prayed that I could be a Beatitude person, a Sermon on the Mount Christian, someone who bases his life on Jesus' words and way and wisdom.

These three journeys to the Chapel of the Beatitudes color my understanding of Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. They brought those ancient teachings to life and pushed me to accept their challenge. Not everyone has to go to the Sea of Galilee to learn the Sermon on the Mount, of course, but every Christian does have to read, study, and learn the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount if they dare to follow Jesus.

I don't claim to be an expert, but I have pondered these teachings for many years and, like many others, earnestly desire to live them out. I offer these reflections on Jesus' Beatitudes and Sermon on the Mount teachings with the hope and prayer that they might encourage others to take Jesus' word seriously, that others will try to live their lives according to them, that together we might seek justice, practice mercy, make peace, and proclaim the coming of God's kingdom of nonviolence.

These meditations are a call to action, a summons to take

up the Beatitudes as a blueprint for life and the Sermon on the Mount as a methodology for living peace, seeking justice in the world, and practicing nonviolence. These Scriptures offer the best way forward toward a nonviolent life and a nonviolent world and demand to be put into action. Whether or not we reach the full heights of the Sermon on the Mount, we will surely be blessed if we try. That's the promise.

May this little book help us to follow Jesus, take him at his word, and join his campaign of nonviolence for a new world without war, poverty, nuclear weapons, environmental destruction, and violence. May it encourage us to become who we were created to be—Beatitude people, Sermon on the Mount people, peacemakers, the sons and daughters of the God of peace.

**John Dear**

*Santa Fe, New Mexico*

## CHAPTER ONE

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# GANDHI'S DISCOVERY

A few years ago, I journeyed to India with Arun Gandhi, grandson of the Mahatma, who was raised in India by Gandhi himself at the height of the struggle for India's independence. A highlight of that memorable pilgrimage was visiting Gandhi's ashram on the outskirts of Ahmedabad. In 1917, Gandhi founded the Sabarmati ashram far outside the city, in rural desert country overlooking the Sabarmati River. Hundreds of dedicated people lived with him and his wife and children. They prayed every morning and evening, shared everything in common, grew their own food, published a newspaper, and organized the nonviolent campaign for India's independence from Britain.

Today, the city's sprawl reaches far out into what was once countryside, so that the ashram now stands like an oasis in the busy, impoverished city. The original buildings with their red tile roofs remain intact. The house where Gandhi lived keeps

vigil over the river exactly as it did one hundred years ago. Like any adobe house in New Mexico, it has its own simple beauty. The ashram exudes not just peace but power.

Today, the ashram foundation runs elementary schools, soup kitchens, and social services for thousands of impoverished neighborhood children. We spent a few days exploring it all. We ate with the kids, met the teachers, learned about their work, and contributed to their program.

Then one day, while the rest of the group made a trip into the city, my friends Janet and Judith and I stayed behind and made a little retreat at Gandhi's house. All morning, I sat in silence on the floor of the veranda, just outside Gandhi's bare room with its tiny wooden desk, his spinning wheel, and a large white pillow, looking out over the desert canyon and the running river far below. This was the view Gandhi knew and loved, the place he called home, the doorway to his inner peace. The stark landscape reminded me of the American Southwest, but the stifling heat and the extreme humidity were something altogether new. As I entered into Gandhi's spirit and landscape, I felt a profound peace and a renewed inner strength to continue my own work for justice, disarmament, and peace.

A few feet away from Gandhi's front porch, near the edge of the cliff leading straight down the canyon to the river, was a large square of brown stones on the brown dirt. This place marked the spot where Gandhi sat with his community in silent prayer and meditation. They sang hymns, professed their vows, and renewed their daily commitment to nonviolence. It was here that Gandhi read from chapter two of the Bhagavad Gita, a selection from the Koran—and also from the Sermon on the Mount.

Gandhi, it turns out, read from the Sermon on the Mount nearly every morning and evening for over forty years. Although he wasn't a Christian, he decided early on to live his life accord-

ing to Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. As he wrote in his autobiography, the first time he read them, probably in the 1890s in Durban, South Africa, they went "straight to my heart." Such teachings as "Offer no violent resistance to evil; turn the other cheek; and if any man takes away your coat, give him your cloak as well," he wrote, "delighted me beyond measure."<sup>1</sup> "When I came to the New Testament and the Sermon on the Mount, I began to understand Christianity," he wrote. "The teaching of the Sermon on the Mount echoed something I had learned in childhood and something which seemed to be part of my being and which I felt was being acted [out] in the daily life around me."<sup>2</sup> "I saw that the Sermon on the Mount was the whole of Christianity for those who want to live a Christian life. It is that Sermon which has endeared Jesus to me."<sup>3</sup> "The gentle figure of Christ—so patient, so kind, so loving, so full of forgiveness that he taught his followers not to retaliate when abused or struck, but to turn the other cheek—I thought this was a beautiful example of the perfect human being."<sup>4</sup>

Gandhi considered the Sermon on the Mount, along with the Bhagavad Gita, the greatest writing on nonviolence in history. He wanted to be a person of nonviolence, so he returned to the Sermon on the Mount every morning and evening for guidance, as if it were his daily guidebook or "How-to" manual. He concluded that if he wanted to live like Jesus and practice nonviolence like Jesus, he had to take Jesus' teachings seriously and study them daily in order to put them into practice. He let the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount disarm him, change him, and form him into the peacemaker he became. This daily discipline transformed the ordinary lawyer Mohandas K. Gandhi into the universal figure of the Mahatma.

From a Gandhian perspective, Jesus is the epitome of nonviolence. He is perfectly nonviolent toward everyone. He forms his community of disciples to practice his way of nonviolence,

and he sends them out as “sheep into the midst of wolves” to announce God’s reign of peace. When Jesus’ own grass-roots campaign of nonviolence reaches Jerusalem, he engages in nonviolent civil disobedience in the Temple, is arrested, tortured, and executed, and yet remains perfectly nonviolent unto his last breath. Even in his resurrection, Jesus practices nonviolence. He does not utter a word of revenge, anger, or retaliation. Instead, he makes breakfast for those who once abandoned him and gives them his resurrection gift of peace. If we want to follow him, we too have to embody nonviolence, as Gandhi tried, and that means living according to Jesus’ basic teachings on nonviolence in the Sermon on the Mount.

Gandhi invites us to read from the four gospels every day from the perspective of active nonviolence. Because we are so immersed in the culture of violence and have become experts at violence, he suggests we immerse ourselves over and over again in the nonviolent life of Jesus, and in particular, the Sermon on the Mount, which brings together Jesus’ basic teachings of nonviolence.

Well, that sounds nice, you’re thinking, but that’s a bit idealistic. Jesus was God, so it was easier for him. I can never reach his divine heights of peace, love, and nonviolence, so why bother even trying?

Yet Gandhi disciplined himself to read daily from the Sermon on the Mount, and live according to those teachings. Because of this commitment, he helped liberate both South Africa and India from systemic violence and showed the world the power of active nonviolence. In the process, he became a Christ-like figure, “the greatest Christian of modern times,” according to Martin Luther King Jr.

Like Gandhi, we too can turn down the voices of the culture of violence, listen attentively to the voice of the nonviolent Jesus, and let that voice be the preeminent guide for our lives.

Fortified by these holy teachings, we too can go forth strengthened and empowered to do our part to end war, poverty, nuclear weapons, and environmental destruction and to welcome a new world of nonviolence. This is a spiritual practice worth pursuing.

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